



# SICOFAA

## Building Trust and Confidence throughout the Western Hemisphere

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**A**S A CAREER aviator, my flying experience has fundamentally shaped the way I view the world. I call it an “airman’s perspective.” Aviation has made the world a smaller place. You can have breakfast at home and eat dinner on another continent. From aloft, the land below seems a singular place, a single entity, a system made up of subsystems. Gone unnoticed are the boundaries that separate states and the tensions that divide mankind. When aviators gather—regardless of language, political, or cultural differences—they are united by this shared perspective. This commonality helps transcend historical differences and current political climates to address issues of mutual interest. It is this perspective which underlies the organization known as the System of Cooperation among the American Air Forces (SICOFAA).

In the early 1960s, SICOFAA was simply a forum for air force leaders from the nations of the Western Hemisphere to establish an ongoing dialogue. During these early years, the shared airman’s perspective quickly led to the development of close personal relationships among these senior aviators. Air chiefs from member countries gathered without any formal agenda to discuss mutual interests in military aviation and associated issues. Their holistic perspective became the foundation of the organization they later formalized. They recognized that simple fellowship,

devoid of all pretensions of power, could be a catalyst for future progress. This relaxed, no-pressure environment encouraged mutual confidence and trust among the senior airmen of countries throughout the Americas. For more than three decades, the resulting organization has contributed enormously to regional security and stability.

Today, SICOFAA is a dynamic, vigorous, and growing multinational organization. It has proven to be a resilient, enduring, and productive fixture of hemispheric relations for over 35 years. Currently, SICOFAA includes 18 member nations, including the US and Canada, plus six observer countries. This is not a US-run organization, but an American continental organization that provides an opportunity for airmen to engage in a dialogue among equals to explore methods of fostering cooperation and trust. The official language is Spanish, and member nations participate on equal terms. This forum has produced significant benefits for the Americas for over three decades.

### Regional Shift towards Democracy

It is not too bold to conclude that the relationships, the trust, the openness, and the confidence that SICOFAA has engendered among its neigh-

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bors has created a new era of peace, stability, and security in the Americas. Much of the progress is due to the maturation of relations between nations based on mutual respect. Contributing to the positive trend in the region is the fact that militaries, which in the past held sway over many governments, have shown greater commitment to democratic norms and a willingness to serve their nations in a truly professional manner. The concept of "cooperative security" is emerging, with greater emphasis on integrated approaches to shared problems. Effective military instruments need not always be used for war.

In the case of airpower, air force professionals from all countries make an impact when they share their knowledge of defense organization and civilian control with their counterparts from other nations. This may include using air force assets to extend a helping hand for humanitarian relief in support of international objectives.

Since the establishment of SICOFAA, nearly every nation in the region has adopted a democratic form of government. Though the development of democratic institutions is not uniform across the region, cooperative organizations such as SICOFAA help democracy to flourish. Nations in the region are engaging in meaningful combined exercises, and real-world operations. This level of cooperation between air forces could not have been predicted three decades ago. SICOFAA has contributed immeasurably to this shift towards mutual trust in the Western Hemisphere.

## History of SICOFAA

The history of SICOFAA can be viewed from four basic stages of growth. Each of these stages of organizational growth and maturation are marked with examples of increasing trust and cooperation. A look back to the beginning of the organization 35 years ago serves as a reminder of just how far the Americas have progressed. A view of the hemisphere in the early 1960s presents an ambiguous picture. In 1961, democracy was scarce in Latin America. Isolationist policies among nations in the region preempted establishment of programmatic dialogue between nations, thus allowing governments meager

opportunity for addressing interstate tensions. Additionally, many countries were ruled by authoritarian governments and were burdened with unresolved border disputes, heavy international debts, and human rights problems, all within a world that viewed international relations through a bipolar lens.

In this atmosphere of tension and uncertainty, Gen Thomas D. White, the US Air Force chief of staff, conceived the idea of gathering the air chiefs from nations across the Western Hemisphere for discussion on topics of mutual interest. The intent was to strengthen interinstitutional relationships and to develop a system of effective professional cooperation. The first meeting of these air chiefs took place at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, in 1961 under the name of Conference of the Chiefs of the American Air Forces—the first CONJEFAMER. The air chiefs saw great promise in their gathering so they agreed to meet annually thereafter. In 1964, the Peruvian air force proposed forming a formal, yet voluntary, organization representing all of the air forces of the Americas. This formal organization evolved into what is now SICOFAA.

The next stage of organizational development began in the 1970s. By this time many personal relationships had matured. As a result, member nations widely agreed on the need for a more structured organization. It was during this period that SICOFAA's basic charter was defined and its infrastructure was designed. As time progressed and the organization matured, intermediate levels of operation were developed, thus gradually producing a coherent and functioning multinational organization.

It was during this period that this organization began to demonstrate its worth. In 1972, after an earthquake in Managua, Nicaragua, nations in the region were initially notified through a communications network established by SICOFAA. This same network greatly facilitated a quick disaster relief effort. It also helped establish an air bridge to deliver much needed medical supplies, food, equipment, reconstruction materials, and air evacuation aid. A similar situation occurred in 1975 when an earthquake in Guatemala left 25,000 dead and over one million homeless.

Once again, member nations quickly responded with airborne aid and assistance.

By the 1980s, with personal relationships and communications channels long established, senior air force officers from nations throughout the region were working on issues of mutual interest or even finding themselves on opposing sides of an impending crisis. It is in crisis situations that the efforts of an organization like SICOFAA pays its biggest dividends. Such mature relationships were certainly tested in 1982, when British warships were heading towards the Falklands/Malvinas and Argentina was scheduled to host CONJEFAMER for 10 days beginning on 6 April 1982. This CONJEFAMER was held as scheduled without any attempt to politically exploit the conference by Argentinian air force leadership. In fact, the impending crisis with Great Britain was not even mentioned. This behavior validated the true apolitical nature of SICOFAA in that the relationships endured despite political tensions. In fact, a scheduled CONJEFAMER has never been postponed or canceled for political reasons.

This period also witnessed an increase in the efficiency of SICOFAA as an organization. Members sought more substantive organizational results. This proved to be a catalyst for action and increased the emphasis on producing results within the various committees. Officer exchanges between member services opened the door for shared exchange of information. This eventually led to member nations sharing with each other their operational and organizational philosophies; weather forecasting techniques; regional epidemiological information focusing on cause, prognosis, and treatment of disease; and other topics of interest to air forces. The creation of a training database consisting of the various courses taught by member air forces, which enhanced the curriculum of the Inter-American Air Forces Academy (IAAFA) provides yet more opportunities for shared information and military-to-military contacts. Today IAAFA offers over 70 training courses for enlisted members and officers in areas such as support operations, aircraft maintenance, and engine repair. Moreover, this period witnessed a vast improvement in the coordination, cooperation, and operational capability

of search and rescue (SAR) units of member nations.

During the current stage, we are emphasizing process. In fact, we are witnessing a sense of accomplishment and unprecedented commitment to the processes under SICOFAA. In the last several years, SICOFAA has kept pace with the transition of the Americas from a region grappling with political conflicts and economic setbacks to one of the most democratic and economically vibrant in the world.

For instance, at the 1996 Aviation Law Symposium, a symposium organized by the Control of Illegal Flights Committee and hosted by the Chilean air force, member nations studied the various legal interpretations of the Chicago Convention. This analysis focused on the legal ramifications associated with an article of the convention, which captures the legal issues associated with efforts to control narcotics trafficking. Each country's representative explained their nation's laws and how they are being implemented. Through this process, it was realized that all member nations had similar needs, concerns, and governing laws. In addition, both the Aviation Law Symposium and the Control of Illegal Flights Committee recommended the establishment of a legal committee to study and develop new legislative proposals to address common aviation law issues.

Other examples abound in areas such as search and rescue where combined operations, combined training programs, and personnel exchange programs are establishing a network of SAR capability that is greater than the sum of its parts. Nations with satellites are preempting potential tensions by revealing the purpose of satellites used for deforestation, erosion detection, weather, and global positioning (GPS). Additionally, several nations have agreed to share in the expense of pilot simulator training. This is resulting in increased simulator usage, improved cost benefit, and shared expense. The sharing of weather software and technology between nations is leading to standardized meteorological reporting and forecasting throughout the region. Furthermore, exchange programs across a multitude of disciplines are resulting in shared knowl -

edge and expense in training, and they foster the growth of new personal relationships.

## Structure of SICOFAA

The purpose of SICOFAA is to promote cooperation among American air forces through the cultivation of valued personal relationships. Member nations of SICOFAA place great pride in the organization's ability to continuously provide an apolitical forum regardless of the often tumultuous international climate. Personal contacts and the exchange of information and ideas among militaries promote mutual trust and understanding. Advancing these areas has contributed to increased stability across the Americas. A quick look at SICOFAA's organization and history will help illustrate its contribution to increased security and stability in the Western Hemisphere.

SICOFAA operates on a 12-month cycle beginning each year with the closure of the annual CONJEFAMER and runs through the following year's conference. SICOFAA is divided into seven different elements which provide everything from oversight to administrative support. CONJEFAMER consists of the air chiefs from each member air force and constitutes the decision-making body of SICOFAA. The scope of CONJEFAMER covers a wide range of topics regarding military air operations in the Americas. These topics range from organizational structure, exercise opportunities, the entire spectrum of aerospace medicine, to logistics support and other topics of common interest to the member air forces. CONJEFAMER establishes committees as necessary to study activities or specific areas of interest to member air forces and to make recommendations on those activities to the air chiefs. Currently there are nine standing committees that cover a wide range of topics: logistics, meteorology, aerospace science and technology, control of illegal flights, training, medicine, accident prevention, search and rescue, and information systems.

Other elements of SICOFAA include the Supervisory Council, which is a constituted body comprised of the air attachés of each member air

force assigned in Washington, D.C., and one representative from the US Air Force. This council provides the organizational and financial oversight of SICOFAA. SICOFAA stages symposiums periodically to address specific issues or concepts, then either dissolves them following their completion or, if warranted, they stand up as a constituted committee. Finally, the Permanent Secretariat is an administrative and executive organization that provides continuity to SICOFAA. The Secretariat is a focal point for verifying, regulating, coordinating, and compiling the data generated by the various components of SICOFAA. The position of secretary general is filled by a US Air Force colonel who is nominated by the US Air Force chief of staff and confirmed by member air chiefs at CONJEFAMER.

## Reaping the Benefits

A testament to how far relationships in the American air forces have matured can be seen in just one example. At the 1994 Chilean Airshow (FIDAE '94), aviators from three countries demonstrated their combined aerial prowess. The combined seven-ship aerial demonstration awed spectators. Even more impressive was the composition of the formation. In the lead was a Chilean Mirage Pantera, on its wings were two Peruvian Mirage 2000s, and in the slots were four Argentine Pampas! Obviously an incredible amount of coordination and cooperation went into orchestrating this demonstration. More importantly, however, is the degree of trust it reflected between the participating nations, their air forces, and their pilots. Those pilots had to completely trust every other pilot in that formation. For the duration of the demonstration, they were as one in the air. They were all airmen.

The maturation of SICOFAA as an organization has brought with it many valuable lessons in learning to deal with the individual nation's sensitivities. This has helped open the doors for greater cooperation and trust and has illuminated the organization's utility. The proven multilateral, apolitical nature of SICOFAA has earned the confidence of the air chiefs, allowing for a more open exchange of information. Though in

formation exchange has improved greatly, it is still a challenging issue.

Due to both cultural and security sensitivities throughout the region, sharing operational information can be difficult. For example, it is not a common practice in many of the cultures of the region to disclose pilot or maintenance errors that result in fatalities. Additionally, member nations harbor concerns in sharing information that may be operationally revealing. In these cases, SICOFAA helps perform a balancing act of sorts. On one hand, it protects a nation's operational concerns while helping to share information that may be critical in nature. Through its apolitical forum and the mature relationships fostered by SICOFAA, a procedural solution has been arranged. In these cases, the information is sent to the Permanent Secretariat, sanitized down to the essential details, then retransmitted to all members under SICOFAA authority—thus maintaining discretion for the source nation while providing valuable information to member nations.

A recent example of this delicate situation involved a nation that was having a recurring maintenance problem common to a type of aircraft operated by other members' air forces. Investigations revealed a procedural deficiency that frequently resulted in an improperly installed part. Realizing that this was probably not unique to just their air force, yet prudently protective of their internal operations, they disclosed their findings to the SICOFAA Permanent Secretariat, which in turn distributed a sanitized version of this critical information to member nations. In this manner, other member countries that operated the same aircraft were alerted to conduct their own inspections, resulting in the discovery of multiple cases of the same problem.

Another example lies in depot-level maintenance such as engine overhauls. This extensive maintenance procedure typically must be performed by the manufacturing nation. Since many nations in the Americas operate aircraft purchased from nations outside the region, the aircraft have to be flown or shipped back to the originating nation for the maintenance to be performed. This is obviously a very expensive and lengthy process. With the increased aircraft

maintenance capabilities in the region, and the sharing of this information, some overhauls are now accomplished in Latin America at much greater savings and substantially shorter turnaround.

## Future of SICOFAA

What will the next phase of SICOFAA witness? What new levels of cooperation, trust, and accomplishment will be realized in the next millennium? The answer lies in ever-closer cooperation between member nations. That cooperation will manifest itself in initiatives such as the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC).

The CAOC has the potential to be the primary conduit for facilitating multinational responses to illegal flight activities associated with drug trafficking. The idea of the CAOC has been agreed to in concept by the SICOFAA air chiefs and is now awaiting ratification by member governments. This unprecedented multilateral initiative will provide real-time coordination of efforts to pursue narcotics traffickers. This is important for the war on drugs because aircraft operated by traffickers often have more loiter time than most intercept aircraft. Thus, all they have to do is fly low, maneuver, and head straight for the nearest border. Intercept aircraft cannot pursue them into neighboring countries due to border sensitivities in relation to military overflight. Therefore, many traffickers are able to traverse the region in this manner.

The CAOC will have in place representatives from member nations who will monitor the pursuit of narcotraffickers throughout the region and facilitate rapid coordination of border overflights or hand-offs between the forces of different countries. Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela are the initial participants in this unprecedented cooperative effort. This type of endeavor was virtually unthinkable just six or seven years ago. It represents the major shift in thinking to which SICOFAA has contributed. Nations are beginning to change their entire perspective on this issue: the enemy is not the pursuit aircraft; instead, it is the pursued aircraft.

Another initiative that offers insight into the next phase includes the efforts under way to install emergency locator transmitters (ELT) on all member-nation aircraft. These devices enable search and recovery teams to locate downed aircraft. In June 1995, a conceptual agreement was reached by member nations to place ELTs on all commercial and military aircraft and ships. Chile currently has the ability to detect ELTs anywhere in the country and can even determine if a signal is real or just a test. Yet another initiative is the effort to establish communications redundancy through high-frequency radio, E-mail, fax, and voice phones. This will greatly increase the timeliness and reliability of communications during emergency responses throughout the region.

Yet another example of future benefits can be reflected in the adaptation of a SICOFAA initiative for global implementation. The conceptual development of a worldwide aircraft parts warehouse recognizes the need, as did SICOFAA air chiefs, to provide a catalogued record of aircraft parts availability from around the world. This system, conceptually borrowed from a SICOFAA initiative, will allow nations from across the globe to list overstocked or underutilized parts and equipment for other member nations to purchase. This access to needed parts will provide spare parts at a significantly lower price than previously available. This arrangement will also allow nations with overages to turn idle assets into productive incomes. SICOFAA contributed to

this global initiative by demonstrating that cooperation among nations can yield benefits greater than the sum of the individual contributions.

From its humble beginnings, SICOFAA has grown into a vibrant organization with great potential for future growth. All member nations have a vital stake in this future. Regardless of the undertaking, corollary benefits will certainly include confidence building and increased trust. The value of this is immeasurable, for what price can be placed on regional stability? How much is it worth to minimize the risk of crisis for a nascent democracy?

US Secretary of Defense William Perry proposed that nations have three lines of defense: the first and most effective is to prevent threats from emerging; the second is to deter threats that do emerge; and the third is direct military intervention. I would suggest that in the Americas we have been pursuing the first line of defense for more than 30 years. As if to validate Secretary Perry's construct, our peacetime engagement in initiatives under SICOFAA have contributed to peace, prosperity, and democracy throughout the Americas. I would also contend that the most basic mission of a professional soldier is to maintain the peace. Providing a defensive front line that focuses on multinational cooperation epitomizes that mission. It is this philosophy that is embodied within SICOFAA. □